



The Collapse: The Accidental Opening of the Berlin Wall

By Mary Elise Sarotte

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On the night of November 9, 1989, massive crowds surged toward the Berlin Wall, drawn by an announcement that caught the world by surprise: East Germans could now move freely to the West. The Wall—infamous symbol of divided Cold War Europe—seemed to be falling. But the opening of the gates that night was not planned by the East German ruling regime—nor was it the result of a bargain between either Ronald Reagan or George H.W. Bush and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

It was an accident.

In *The Collapse*, prize-winning historian Mary Elise Sarotte reveals how a perfect storm of decisions made by daring underground revolutionaries, disgruntled Stasi officers, and dictatorial party bosses sparked an unexpected series of events culminating in the chaotic fall of the Wall. With a novelist's eye for character and detail, she brings to vivid life a story that sweeps across Budapest, Prague, Dresden, and Leipzig and up to the armed checkpoints in Berlin.

We meet the revolutionaries Roland Jahn, Aram Radomski, and Siggi Schefke, risking it all to smuggle the truth across the Iron Curtain; the hapless Politburo member Günter Schabowski, mistakenly suggesting that the Wall is open to a press conference full of foreign journalists, including NBC's Tom Brokaw; and Stasi officer Harald Jäger, holding the fort at the crucial border crossing that night. Soon, Brokaw starts broadcasting live from Berlin's Brandenburg Gate, where the crowds are exulting in the euphoria of newfound freedom—and the dictators are plotting to restore control.

Drawing on new archival sources and dozens of interviews, *The Collapse* offers the definitive account of the night that brought down the Berlin Wall.

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Editorial Review

Review

Kirkus

“A rigorous sifting of evidence surrounding the final toppling of the sclerotic East German state. With extensive use of Stasi files, Sarotte finds that accident, rather than planning, caused the collapse of the Berlin Wall.... [T]his account amply conveys the universal amazement and excitement of the time.”

Library Journal

“[Sarotte] utilizes international reactions, publications, and interviews to highlight or offset her main narrative and in doing so creates a cohesive picture of a tumultuous nation whose oppressed yet hopeful citizenry sought the freedom they had been denied. Amply researched and emotive, this work shares the full narrative of events leading to the fall of the Berlin Wall in a way that both academics and lay readers will appreciate.”

O.A. Westad, author of *Restless Empire: China and the World since 1750*

“History the way it should be written: world historical change, seen through the eyes of the people who lived through it, and a top historian who can tell us what it all meant. Highly recommended for everyone with an interest in global affairs.”

Telegraph, UK

“A fast-paced, fascinating account of the final weeks, days and hours of the wall.”

Winnipeg Free Press, CAN

“Brief, intense, and gripping.... Sarotte's effort is magnificent.... This is history at its best.”

Washington Post's Post Everything Blog

“The book that will haunt Vladimir Putin as long as he's in power.”

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

“The most definitive account to date of the events that led to the demise of the German Democratic Republic, the reunification of Germany and the end of the Cold War.... It is a scholarly work of considerable accomplishment, painstakingly researched, fastidiously documented.... This book is well-written, even fluid. Ultimately, it rewards the patient reader, who emerges with a deeper and richer understanding of one of the most astonishing and memorable events of the past quarter century.”

Booklist, starred review

“An inspiring and often thrilling account.”

Publishers Weekly

“This gripping, important account of a long-misinterpreted event is one of the most surprising books about the Cold War.”

Economist Best Books of 2014

“A blow-by-blow account of the birth of modern Germany on November 9th 1989, when, at an otherwise dull press conference in East Berlin, a government spokesman said that a new law permitting East Germans more freedom to travel would go into effect immediately. It changed Europe for ever.”

BBC History Magazine 2014 Books of the Year

“This is history writing at its very best, full of drama and pathos, yet immaculately researched and elegantly written.”

Zócalo Public Square 10 Best Books of 2014

“*The Collapse* challenges our narrative of the Soviet Union's collapse, 25 years after the Wall's fall. Sarotte deftly balances individual human agency and contingency with larger political forces to show that the Berlin Wall coming down was neither inevitable nor the result of global power shifts alone.”

Wall Street Journal

“Sarotte runs a fine-tooth comb through the archives and gathers an impressive range of stories from the ordinary people at the heart of these extraordinary events. She is keen to dispel the kind of convenient ‘hindsight bias’ which claims that the peaceful fall of the Wall was inevitable or engineered by bigger forces than human beings who wanted a different life.”

Fredrik Logevall, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam*

“It's one of the most astonishing events in contemporary world history: the sudden fall of the Berlin Wall one autumn day in 1989. Mary Elise Sarotte tells the story with verve and insight, drawing on a wide array of previously untapped sources. The outcome, her gripping narrative suggests, was in no way inevitable, but resulted from a series of high-pressure decisions by individuals—many of them hitherto unknown—who might easily have chosen differently. A splendid book.”

Angela Stent, author of *The Limits of Partnership: US-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century*

“In her compelling and fast-paced narrative, Mary Elise Sarotte reminds us that the end of the Cold War was not foreordained, but that courageous acts by East German dissidents, offhand comments by GDR officials, and the actions of one perplexed border-guard changed the course of twentieth-century history. This is essential reading for those who want to understand the role of contingency and human agency in the unexpected opening of the Berlin Wall.”

Serhii Plokhy, author of *The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union*

“Meticulously researched, judiciously argued, and exceptionally well written, *The Collapse* describes the fall of the Berlin Wall from an unprecedented perspective. Mary Elise Sarotte weaves together numerous German, American, and Soviet accounts, allowing the reader to crisscross the Berlin Wall on the eve and in the course of its collapse. It will come as a surprise to many that this climactic event in Cold War history resulted not from agreements reached in Washington, Berlin, Moscow, or Bonn, but from the uncoordinated actions of people on both sides of the Berlin divide. *The Collapse* makes it possible for those who made history in 1989 to speak in their own voices.”

Rick Atkinson, Pulitzer Prize winner and author of *The Guns at Last Light*

“A lucid, compelling account that illuminates the most astonishing event of the late twentieth century. With verve and impeccable scholarship, Mary Elise Sarotte tells a tale no novelist could have invented—the decline and fall of the Berlin Wall.”

General Brent Scowcroft, former National Security Adviser

“In *The Collapse*, Mary Elise Sarotte provides a needed (and highly readable) reminder that the peaceful culmination to 1989’s dramatic developments was in no way inevitable.”

Tom Brokaw

“*The Collapse* is a riveting and important account of the political chaos in East Germany that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall. Mary Elise Sarotte is a distinguished historian with a playwright’s eye who gives us fresh insights and telling anecdotes about one of the most important nights of the late twentieth century.”

Joseph S. Nye, Jr., Harvard University Distinguished Service Professor and author of *The Future of Power*

“The fall of the Berlin Wall was one of the landmark events of the twentieth century, but this great change involved accidental and non-violent causes. In wonderfully readable prose, Mary Elise Sarotte tells a compelling story of how history works its surprises.”

William Taubman, Bertrand Snell Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Amherst College and Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era*

“Can you believe that the fall of the Berlin Wall was a mistake? That the event that changed the world was the result of a series of misunderstandings? Mary Elise Sarotte’s fine, important book, based on painstaking archival research as well as extensive interviews, will not only convince you, but entertain you as well.”

Fareed Zakaria GPS Book of the Week

“This is easily the best book on the fall of the Berlin Wall. It reads like a thriller, it’s deeply researched and smoothly written. It will remind you how unlikely it was that the Soviet empire would collapse until one day it did.”

Economist

“[This] story has not previously been told...so vividly and comprehensively. [Sarotte] brings those dramatic days to life.... The events she describes are at times so unlikely and unfold so quickly that her plot would probably have been rejected in Tinseltown had she offered it during the Cold War.”

Financial Times Best History Books of 2014

“An authoritative and fast-moving account of the events that led up to the collapse of East Germany.”

Washington Post

“Sarotte is a superb historian. She’s ferociously intelligent, but what really separates her from her colleagues is her acute sensitivity to human drama.”

Guardian, UK

“Sarotte has produced a skillful, scrupulously documented, nuanced reconstruction of how a series of mistakes by East German leaders and officials...turned what was meant to be a carefully managed process of controlled opening...into the world’s most celebrated festival of popular liberation.”

About the Author

Mary Elise Sarotte is Visiting Professor of Government and History at Harvard University and Dean’s Professor of History at the University of Southern California. A former White House Fellow and Humboldt Scholar, she is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and the author, most recently, of *1989: The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe*, a *Financial Times* Book of the Year. She lives in Boston and Los Angeles.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Carrie Porter:

This The Collapse: The Accidental Opening of the Berlin Wall book is absolutely not ordinary book, you have it then the world is in your hands. The benefit you will get by reading this book is usually information inside this publication incredible fresh, you will get info which is getting deeper you read a lot of information you will get. This specific The Collapse: The Accidental Opening of the Berlin Wall without we realize teach the one who looking at it become critical in thinking and analyzing. Don't become worry The Collapse: The Accidental Opening of the Berlin Wall can bring when you are and not make your carrier space or bookshelves' turn out to be full because you can have it in the lovely laptop even telephone. This The Collapse: The Accidental Opening of the Berlin Wall having very good arrangement in word and also layout, so you will not really feel uninterested in reading.

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